

In the City that Never Sleeps

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In the City that Never Sleeps

by [isntitcrazy](#)

Summary

Karl had looked to his side at the boy he'd pulled up next to, planted a foot on the ground to stabilize himself and the bike he straddled. They locked eyes across the lane, sat a little too close together with a mutual lack of helmets. It drew Karl just a touch closer to the stranger in the figurative sense, like an agreement that went unknown between themselves.

Maybe he was a little bit stupid, like Karl. A little bit impulsive and a little bit too driven by cute boys on hot motorcycles.

“Wanna race?”

In a city of eternal darkness, Karl finds the greatest thrill in high-speed racing. Maybe he'll find a thrill in boys who feel like flame, too.

Notes

lowkey cyberpunk au. that part kinda happened by accident lol i just wanted to write bamf karlnap

They met on the street.

Karl remembered it like it was yesterday. *Was it yesterday?* In all honesty, he could never remember—not even if he tried. Life had become a mess of dark skies and fast cars, a mess of scarred hands caught on handlebars and helmetless riding. (How else was he supposed to feel the wind in his hair when he went 120 in a 50?)

He never slept, either. Sleep had become a concept lost on the world the moment it all turned to pulsing neon, the moment it all became high tech and fast life. Which was, perhaps, some time before Karl had ever been alive. He wasn't sure, and he couldn't remember what they'd taught him in school.

In all honesty, Karl's memory had gotten a little faulty after he took a nasty spill off his motorcycle when he was fifteen. (He wasn't even supposed to have a motorcycle when he was fifteen, but IDs had somehow gotten *easier* to fake and Karl was known for being tricky).

So he was a little bit messed up. A little bit not-all-there. He may have forgotten the origin of the scar on the back of his hand, but all the important parts remained. The parts that knew how to work a purple chrome motorcycle, the parts that could drive his matching violet supercar. The parts that could fall in line with cute boys on orange bikes on the road beneath neon lights and dare them to race.

Karl liked dares. He liked being a little bit stupid and a little bit impulsive, liked quick decisions about who was the cutest guy he'd seen that night and seeing how well he could bat his pretty eyelashes. (The answer was well, he'd learned from the best).

It was beneath the wash of a red light—a light not bright enough or close enough to spill out onto the street. But there was enough messy color flowing out from the walls of the buildings that swallowed them whole, enough light from the street lights that served to illuminate a city that was known for eternal darkness and starless skies.

Karl had looked to his side at the boy he'd pulled up next to, planted a foot on the ground to stabilize himself and the bike he straddled. They locked eyes across the lane, sat a little too close together with a mutual lack of helmets. It drew Karl just a touch closer to the stranger in the figurative sense, like an agreement that went unknown between themselves.

Maybe he was a little bit stupid, like Karl. A little bit impulsive and a little bit too driven by cute boys on hot motorcycles.

“Wanna race?”

Karl had to yell over the surrounding noise of engines, the echo of high-speed city life and buildings that stretched up into the sky. Dull green eyes flashed in something colored with flame, an electrifying catch that Karl knew better in his own eyes—eyes he'd stained purple in difference to the orange he was locked in with now.

“Tell me your name first.”

Karl laughed, and he wondered if the boy could hear it. Ring-clad hands twisted against handlebars, eyes flicked forward to catch sight of a still-red light. It almost felt like time had

stopped, and maybe it was just for them. (It felt like that a lot for Karl, both through violet haze and red adrenaline).

He gave the name he'd gotten tattooed on his middle finger. "K."

"K?" An incredulous raise of thick eyebrows, a responding nod from the K in question. "Sapnap."

"Well, Sapnap," Karl prompted, "let's race."

As if on cue, the light turned green. And without checking for stray cars or cyclists, without checking for any kind of obstruction at all, Karl took off down the brightly lit street.

The lights along the road became nothing more than a blurry flash of color in his peripheral vision, just like the cars around him. He didn't even look at his speedometer anymore, finding nothing enticing about the crawl of a bright red arrow as it got closer to numbers that were objectively too high. He preferred to watch the street in front of him, preferred to pay enough attention to dodge cars through spills of violet laughter at nothing in particular.

Racing motorcycles had advantages when compared to racing cars, advantages like an ability to weave between all the larger vehicles and dodge lanes like they might kill you. Karl had learned through years of experience, had learned through useless races with his best friend on the street and a lot of near misses.

Sometimes it wasn't a miss. Sometimes he got memory problems when his head hit the pavement.

But that was years ago at this point. How many years, Karl wasn't sure—but he knew that he looked older when he checked in the mirror and he'd bought a new bike since then. Had lost the need for a fake ID and gained a real one, had forgotten the birth year printed in dark ink because he never bothered to look. (He rarely used his ID anyways; despite a young face, no one ever bothered to card him).

And besides, Karl preferred to live in a little time called *now*. Now like racing a pretty boy called Sapnap, now like flicking his gaze to the side to see if he could catch a flash of orange chrome where it sped down the street alongside him.

His glances were too fleeting and his speed was too fast. He tipped his bike sideways to loop around another car in front of him, realized that they'd failed to set a finish line when he spotted another intersection up ahead. He watched without regret as the green light turned golden amber, watched with even less than a thought when it dared to turn red.

Objectively, this was a reason not to speed. There wasn't enough space between Karl and the slowing car in front of him to reach a stop in time, not even if he slammed on the brakes with all the force he had. But he'd never *planned* to slam the brakes, and he found that he was once again reminded why motorcycles were better to street race than cars.

His bike was small enough to ride between the lanes. To speed between the stopped cars and only knock his elbow against the protruding mirrors, to glide into traffic that sped in parallel lines when compared to him. But, as Karl had already prided himself on a hundred thousand times, he had *experience*. He had useless races and too much time spent straddling a motorcycle, he had the trained ease of weaving through speeding cars that seemed to slam their brakes when he drove in front of them.

Karl didn't look over his shoulder once he'd reached the other side of the intersection, but he knew it was a mess. And he was laughing, *laughing* violet hues into the cool, forever-night air like

someone had told a joke that wasn't about a near-death experience. Like he hadn't just maybe caused an accident in favor of racing boys he didn't know in the timelessness of the night.

He swung into the first alley he saw, slammed his brakes and listened to his tires screech against the pavement. It left marks in the form of heavy black streaks, and there was an orange bike following suit within the minute.

Karl ran a hand through his hair, black-ink tattoo visible beneath the glow of magenta neon lights. Sapnap had let a foot fall against the ground, still straddling his motorcycle while Karl stood up beside his, the gentle hum of its engine having come to a still. He'd knocked the kickstand down to keep it upright, leaned his weight against the bike while his chest heaved and his body thrummed with hot adrenaline.

"You're reckless, K."

Karl only laughed his violet laugh, paced his way over toward Sapnap to stand next to him where he straddled his motorcycle. He flicked him gently on the shoulder, listened to the heavy breaths that fell through his lips amongst the rush of passing cars and the hum of his bike. Through close proximity and parted lips, Karl caught sight of the ebon-colored tongue ring in Sapnap's mouth.

"You'd be surprised."

Sapnap huffed out a laugh at that, tugging his hands away from the handlebars to shake them out. When his loose-fitting shirt dared to slip forward, Karl noticed a tattoo branded along his collarbone. He couldn't tell what it was, and he didn't ask.

"You ask random strangers to race a lot?" Sapnap queried, the twinkling edge of lilt in his voice almost as bright as the neon lights.

Karl laughed, raked his scarred hand through his hair again and felt his fingers catch where the wind had served him poorly. His heartbeat still refused to calm, everything hammering in his chest hard enough to lick his ribcage red. Maybe, his bones were going to snap.

"Not really," Karl answered truthfully. "Only the really hot ones."

Beneath a mess of magenta neon light, Karl watched Sapnap's cheeks turn warm and pink. He laughed quietly at that, perhaps quiet enough to be swallowed by the sound of nearby traffic and humming motorcycles.

Despite a flustered blush cast across his cheeks, Sapnap still managed to act cocky. Cocky enough to smirk, cocky enough to speak with twirls or arrogant flame caught beneath every word. It matched the brightening hue in his eyes with tangerine heat, strung him together in a wall of burning fire.

He clicked that pretty black tongue piercing against the backs of his front teeth. "You think I'm hot?"

Karl laughed again, maybe loud enough for Sapnap to hear. He was intentional with the way his gaze slid down Sapnap's body, purple-tinted eyes gleaming with interest at every inch.

"Well, duh," he said casually. "I'm not blind."

He might as well be, for how much of a total idiot he was.

Sapnap scoffed and shook his head, tapping one hand against a handlebar with an infrequent

tempo. Karl noticed the black rings on his hand, thought about the ways in which they contrasted his silver jewelry, thought about the way they matched the metal in his mouth. Sapnap didn't have a tattoo on his middle finger, but Karl had failed to meet many people besides himself who did.

He met Sapnap's orange-tinted eyes. "We should race again sometime."

Sapnap laughed in curling flame, knocking the heel of his palm against the handlebar. And despite the fact that he was shaking his head, he sought to agree with Karl's statement.

"Yeah," he huffed, "I want a rematch."

"Oh?" Karl giggled. "You do?"

Sapnap frowned at him like that had been obvious (it was, he'd been the one to say it), scraping his foot against the pavement with a quiet noise. It was drowned out by the cars on the road, drowned out by the quiet hum of the motorcycle between his legs.

"Yeah," he rolled his eyes without much bite, "I didn't know you were gonna be so reckless."

"Get used to it, babe." Karl giggled, pressed the back of his hand against his lips. "I'm as reckless as it comes."

Blushing under magenta neon lights, they met on the street. And Karl wouldn't have had it any other way.

He'd watched Sapnap speed off into the night just as quickly as he'd arrived. That wasn't until *after* the exchange of contact information, hands shaking with leftover adrenaline and heart rates up to concerning levels. Even then, Karl knew it wasn't all about the races—it was about Sapnap, and his pretty, orange-stained eyes, and the way they'd looked at him through neon light like he'd been the only man to ever exist.

They were strangers. Didn't even know the other's real name, or age, or anything very helpful or important. All Karl knew was that Sapnap felt warm, and that didn't only apply to when they'd knocked their fingers together in a hasty exchange of cell phones. It applied to his very existence as a whole, a kind stranger that Karl wished to share space with more often than this—and not only so they could race again.

Immediately following the race, Karl rode his motorcycle all the way to an apartment he knew all too well. Pulled in alongside a bike that matched his but in blue, that strike of violet-sapphire always pretty when they sped down the street. Perhaps his friend had been watching the security cameras, because the door was open before he even asked to be buzzed in.

He stumbled through the door with a heart rate that was still just a little too high. (He'd sped here, laced his bike through driving cars as if there was another hot on his tail).

George was standing behind the counter in the kitchen, fiddling with a knife that he clearly hadn't gotten from the block sat behind him. The white-ink *404* that sat high on his left cheekbone was barely visible from across the room, but Karl knew that it was there—knew that it glowed ultramarine outside beneath the city lights.

"Karl," he greeted, swirled voice rounded in a place unknown. "Have you been racing?"

Karl laughed at the way George knew him so well, giggles in lilac hues caught beneath his breath. Though he was sure that the activity showed fresh on his windblown face, fresh on messed up hair and fingers that still shook with hot adrenaline.

George spun the knife between his fingers. Karl noticed that the blade was cobalt blue.

“Yeah,” Karl practically panted, the word feeling knocked out of his chest despite a position of standing still. “Is it that obvious?”

George laughed, slipped the blade closed so he held onto nothing but the handle. “Kind of,” he spoke with bitter earnest, “but you’re also just predictable.”

Karl sputtered over the heat in his face, wandered closer to the counter in his fit of confusion. George was still laughing in quips of arctic blue from the other side of the island, spinning a sheathed knife around his fingers like it was some kind of game. (To them, life had always been a game).

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Karl’s accusing words were only met with more friendly laughter, dwindling down to huffs of amusement between taken breaths. George tapped a black-coated nail against the handle of his blade, shrugged his shoulders with lax ease before answering.

“I don’t know,” the knife slipped open with intent, “what is it supposed to mean?”

George was always so painfully quippy, flourishing blue tone wrapped thick with sarcasm and bitten lightheart. It was like his twist of a sharp knife in gentle hands, something not-quite right about the hold of something so dangerous between fingers so dainty. George had always been like that, too—a man of juxtaposition.

“Okay,” Karl huffed with the roll of his eyes, “whatever. I only came here to tell you that the guy was, like, *super* hot.”

George cooed in that annoying friendly way, the kind that was emphasized by playful pointing and a twisted smile spread across pink lips. He’d flipped the weapon he held against his palm so the blade faced in toward his elbow, and Karl couldn’t help but wonder if that was proper knife etiquette or not.

“Oh, our little Karl’s got a crush?” George teased, reaching across the counter to jab a finger against Karl’s shoulder. “Look at you, all grown up now!”

He spoke with that too-sarcastic *baby* voice, the one strung too high and too annoying for Karl’s unfortunate ears. It felt a little bit like nails on a chalkboard, and the only thing it made Karl do was frown. George had fallen back over to his side of the counter, twirled a knife between his hands with cobalt intent.

“Who is *our*?” Karl asked with an incredulous edge. “You’re literally the only person here.”

Now it was George’s turn to roll his eyes, scoffing quietly beneath gentle breaths as he set the knife down on the counter. He left that shining blue blade flipped out, the flat of it reflecting the dim lights of his apartment off and back into the ceiling. It seemed to spin against the cold granite, shaking slightly on unstable ground. It reminded Karl of a time he didn’t quite remember.

“Would you rather I said *my* little Karl?”

Karl grimaced. “Yeah, no, that’s objectively terrible.”

George laughed again, flicked the handle of his knife gently to watch it spin against the countertop. It tugged his attention away from Karl’s face, but Karl let his eyes drop as well, found something

interesting in the careful rotation of a blue-bladed knife atop smooth granite.

“Seriously,” George said suddenly, grabbing onto the spinning handle of his blade to halt its motion, “what’s the deal with this hot guy?”

Karl giggled with airy violet, shifting his weight between his feet. George hopped up onto the counter, spinning to sit cross-legged and facing Karl while he toyed with the knife in his lap. In close proximity beneath dim apartment light, George’s *404* tattoo was illuminated in its pure white form. In close proximity beneath dull apartment light, Karl could see the hints of blue that hid beneath umber eyes.

“His name’s Sapnap.”

George furrowed his eyebrows. “Sapnap?”

Karl rubbed at the back of his neck with an aura of nerves, eyes falling to the hardwood floors and the way the light gleamed off them without prettiness. He could practically feel George’s blue-bitten gaze on him, and there was barely any reason for there to be tension between them at all.

“Well,” Karl stumbled over his words. “I assume that’s not his real name.” When he looked back in George’s direction, one of his eyebrows was lifted incredulously. “Like, I told him my name was K.”

“K?” George laughed beneath the letter. “Since when do you go by K?”

“Since I got this tattoo,” Karl spoke as if it were obvious, holding his hand up in front of his face to show off the ink. “Same as you, y’know.”

“Whatever.” George rolled his eyes. “At least 404 is *cool*.”

“We get it, you could hack into the government,” Karl waved his hands in the air to emphasize the layer of sarcastic mockery in his voice, “the only thing stopping you is your moral high ground.”

“Shut up,” George held a sense of urgency in his unkind tone, “you literally picked the *worst* letter to get tattooed on your finger.”

“It’s the first letter of my name!”

George shrugged. “It’s still the worst.”

Karl scoffed and shook his head, eyes trained on the gentle fingers that toyed with the blue metal of a sharpened knife. George seemed to be twirling it absentmindedly in his hands, uncaring of the sharp blade that danced so close to his fingers. Karl tried not to get too caught up on ponders about *knife safety*—like he’d be one to talk—and focused on the sarcastic lilt to his voice in ways that bothered his friend.

“At least my name doesn’t start with a *G*.”

George rolled his eyes with a type of drama Karl hadn’t seen from him in a while, all kinds of exaggerated in the showcase of the whites of his eyes. Karl laughed quietly again, high-pitched and halfway trapped in his throat when he brought a hand up to his lips.

“Okay.” George sighed indignantly. “Fine. Whatever.”

He twirled the knife on the tip of his index finger like it was a basketball—albeit a very dangerous

basketball. (Also, George couldn't play sports). It wavered and slowed in its spin, and George barely caught it before it fell blade-first against his thigh. He paid that fact no mind.

"Tell me about weird-named hot boy."

Karl wanted to scoff at the term George had used, but he bit his lip and resisted. And then he found that he had to think about it for a moment, considering his next words with a careful type of ease that he had come to know. His speech came out pondered and slow, just as he had expected it to.

"Well, we raced," Karl shuffled, staring down at the floor, "and he seemed... I don't know, impressed?"

When he looked up at George, the only kindness he found was in the blue flecks of his irises. The rest of his face looked about ready to start laughing, laced with a sense of not being taken seriously and the twirl of a knife between his fingertips. The numbers on his cheekbone seemed to shine this time, even beneath the same dim apartment light they'd been standing in all along.

"By you?" George did actually laugh, open-mouthed and unapologetic. "Let me meet this guy, I'll tell him how lame you are for real."

Karl stumbled over a defense, hands lifting up from where they hung at his sides to gesture vaguely around the room. George only laughed harder at his incompetence, grip tightening around the handle of his weapon while he leaned back atop the counter.

If Karl weren't so busy trying to find words, he may have been concerned for his friend and how close he came to the edge of his countertop.

"I'm not lame!"

He settled on something that, even after all that mindless sputtering, felt untrue. George shook his head, spinning his knife to wave the blade in Karl's direction like a pointer. Karl took an instinctive step back despite the distance that already sat between them, the shine of cobalt blue and the matching glint in his friend's eyes just barely teetering over threat.

"Screwing up your brain falling off of motorcycles," George had that lilt of accusation, lips tipped upward in something teasing, "does *not* make you cool."

"I never said it did!"

Karl's strange gesturing picked up again, ringed hands flailing around by his head as if that would emphasize his point. George shook his head with that same cheshire grin, reeling his knife back so it was no longer pointed at Karl.

"No," he gave Karl a glare, "I think you did once. But who knows," he shrugged, cobalt danger pulling upward with the motion of his shoulders, "you probably wouldn't remember."

"Oh my god," Karl groaned, "Shut *up*."

George huffed out another swirling blue laugh, closing his knife with a single ring finger. When his head tipped backward toward the light in his kitchen, the tattoo on his face glinted visible again.

"Let me talk about how hot this guy was," Karl pleaded, everything but pouting in his friend's direction.

"Okay." George rolled his eyes with the sighed-out word, but the smile edging at his pink lips

looked a little too genuine. “Spill,” he leaned forward, “what color was his bike?”

“Orange.”

George grinned wider, a hint of kindness hidden beneath all the remnants of teasing. And he seemed to think about something, tapping the handle of the knife against his knuckles.

“Purple and orange look good together.”

Karl giggled through a scoff, shaking his head with enough fervor to rustle his hair. George looked like he already knew what Karl was gearing up to say, and it was true that he probably did.

“You’re literally colorblind.”

George frowned, but the grin stayed halfway across his lips. “And?”

“Just,” Karl shook his head again, “whatever.”

George rolled his eyes, and it only prompted Karl to laugh in lilac swirls again. The handle of a knife tapped against granite countertops while Karl wracked his brain for anything to say, pulling his mind back to flashed smiles beneath neon lights and compliments he didn’t recognize on his tongue. (Adrenaline made him overconfident, a side of himself he was still yet to grow used to).

“I don’t know what else to tell you,” Karl sighed, slumping his shoulders with a sense of defeat. “He had a tongue piercing?”

George seemed to perk up at that, one of his eyebrows lifting with interest. The grin he’d lost to overused jokes found its way back across his lips, and it had only swelled in sapphire teasing.

“Oh, shit,” George spoke with mock passion. “You gonna make out or what?”

Karl groaned, shoving his face into the palms of his hands to hide the way his cheeks were spreading pink. He made another displeased noise against the muffle of his skin, ears full of the teasing sound of George’s laughter as it rang out from the counter.

“*Oh my god.*” Karl whined into his hands. “I literally met him, like, two hours ago.” He pulled his head up from his hands, cheeks still stained rose-pink. “Max.”

“So,” George twirled his wrist in the air as if prompting Karl to continue, “you gonna make out or what?”

Karl made another noise, whined out through grit teeth. He tipped his head back to look at the ceiling and away from George, screwing his eyes shut like that would hide him away forever. George was so *annoying*.

“Why do I ever tell you anything?” Karl complained, earning another azure burst of laughter past the lips of his friend.

“Because you’re lame,” George accused, “and you don’t have any other friends.”

Karl rolled his eyes, head falling forward with a noticeable jostle. George had narrowed eyes and raised brows, and the blue spots in his irises gleamed with self-assured victory. Karl would beg to differ. (Without the begging, he would only differ).

“Literally shut up,” he quipped, “neither do you.”

All the arrogance fell from George's face in less than a second. "Hey!"

Karl laughed in amethyst, something twisted darker with the sense of displeasure his friend wore across his face. George stumbled his way off the counter to knock the heel of his palm against Karl's shoulder, who was still content to laugh hard enough to shake chest.

With a deep breath, Karl quelled his glowing amusement. He refocused his eyes and found George standing in front of him, a frown tugging at the corners of his lips. *This man could dish but he could not take.* With another lilted giggle, Karl flicked the brunet between the eyes, watched them flinch shut at the sudden touch. He moved to hit Karl's shoulder again, but Karl caught his wrist where it hung suspended in the air.

"Anyways," he said quickly, as if interrupting would drive George to back off, "I got Sapnap's number," he pushed him until he dropped his wrist, "and we're gonna race again."

George hung his arms at his sides in defeat, but he didn't move in retreat back toward the counter. He only crossed his arms over his chest, giving Karl an incredulous look in close proximity.

"Oh," he raised an eyebrow, "rematch?"

"Yeah," Karl shrugged, "that's what he said." A self-assured grin spread across his lips, a gleam of ivory behind pink lips. "Because I won."

George scoffed. "Don't lie to yourself."

Karl sputtered over a defense for what felt like the thousandth time, though it was something he should be used to seeing how much time he spent around George. He gestured flippantly with ring-adorned hands, fingers knocking against George's arms when they stood as close as they were.

"I did!" he exclaimed, "I did, I won!"

George rolled his eyes. "Sure."

"I told you he was impressed," Karl was all but whining, "why would he be impressed if I lost!"

George laughed in his swirling tones of faraway places, head slinging backward slightly in unapologetic amusement. It rose up toward the ceiling with teasing intent, and Karl could do nothing but frown where George couldn't see it. Not until his head tipped forward again, glowing look of amusement increasing tenfold when he caught the opposing look on Karl's face.

"Because you did that dumb thing I taught you," George nodded his head toward Karl with his accusatory words, "where you flutter your eyelashes and pout your lips all stupid."

Now it was Karl's turn to roll his eyes, a flash of purple-stained irises rising between his eyelids. George was *dumb*, and Karl wanted to *hit him*. He would if it wasn't going to start a fight, because even if George looked like he didn't weigh any more than 110 pounds, he knew how to land a punch.

"You just admitted that you *taught* me how to do that."

George shrugged. "I do it better."

He probably did. George was the best at looking stupid and pretty, it had gotten him too many drinks at too many bars for too long. He'd only taught Karl the way he did it so they could *both* get free drinks at bars and clubs, but even still, George had a longer success streak.

Not like Karl was going to tell him that, though. Instead, he planned to insult his only friend.

“Okay, then where’s your motorcycle racing hot boy?”

He didn’t miss the way George’s face turned pink, head tipping away from Karl’s gaze to stare out the too-large windows. When he looked in the direction of a city full of neon lights, Karl could see the hues of magenta where they spread across his already tinted cheeks, could see the glow of blue beneath a white-ink tattoo that finally glowed in the way it was supposed to.

“Shut up,” George said finally, the words grumbled out through tight lips and without much bite to them at all.

Karl grinned with the shine of personal victory, knocked the front of his knuckles against George’s shoulder with just enough force to shift his body. It earned him a glare from blue-speckled eyes, the glow of the shade dimming as they were torn away from the neon outside.

“My point has been proven,” Karl spoke with smug victory, the grin on his face a little too arrogant.

George rolled his eyes again, and Karl barely caught it as he turned to walk toward the counter George had left his knife on. He heard the faint, “*you’re such an idiot*,” from where it echoed out from behind him, and all he could respond with was a playful laugh. He paced his way around the back of the countertop, placing himself in the kitchen where George had been when he first got there.

George approached the counter from the other side, pressed his palms against the cold granite and leaned forward as if he was waiting for something. The two of them made eye contact for a brief, fleeting moment, the short-lived lock falling open when two gazes fell back to the countertop beneath shitty apartment light.

A sheathed knife sat between them on the counter. It reminded Karl of something he’d done once before, and though his memory had served to let him forget, he was pretty sure the scar on the back of his hand had something to do with it.

Karl gestured at the blade through all his forgotten memories, barely brushing his fingertips against the handle. The touch was still enough to send it spinning, twirling against the counter in another familiar motion.

“Where’d you get this knife from anyway?”

George furrowed his eyebrows, gesturing at the weapon as it’s lax spin slowed. “That knife?”

“Yeah.”

“I went down to the shop earlier just to look,” George shrugged, “but the cute guy working there told me my bike was cool and gave me a knife to match.”

He said it like it was obvious, like it happened every day. Like *cute* guys gave him free knives on the regular just because his *bike was cool*. Karl—even without knowing anything about proclaimed cute boys in knife shops—knew that it was something a little deeper than cool blue motorcycles.

Because they both had the same bike, only in different colors. And Karl had been to weapons stores a thousand times and left without any free handouts, and he’d seen the way people were oh-so-willing to get George whatever fancy drink he wanted to get drunk on.

Karl could only scoff and shake his head, flicking the handle of the knife to send it sliding across the counter with another half-spin. George caught it before it fell on the ground, raising his eyebrows in Karl's direction with a confused edge to his look.

"What was that about fluttering eyelashes and pouting lips?"

George groaned and rolled his eyes, knife-bearing hand falling down to his side. "Shut up."

"You abuse your pretty privilege," Karl accused, finding the response was nothing more than a huffed-out laugh and the click of a knife from behind the counter.

"Aw," George cooed. "You think I'm pretty?"

Karl shook his head with a disagreeing giggle, the darkened shades of violet carrying nothing but accusation. He ran a ring-clad hand through his hair and found George's eyes across the counter, narrowing his gaze without a smidge of annoyance.

"No," he said simply. "But I think knife boy does."

George didn't say anything about the nickname Karl had chosen, only let his eyes flutter backward with a sigh that felt a little too wistful. His responding words only dug him further into a hole of *teasing material*, but maybe Karl was too nice for any of that. (George was not as nice as Karl).

"God, I hope so."

"Oh," Karl raised an eyebrow, "so you *do* have a hot boy of your own?"

"Barely," George said dismissively, "I don't even know his name."

"Alright, then let's learn it."

Karl shrugged and spoke like it was nothing, like his answer wouldn't leave him standing across from a brunet with confusion licking every feature on his too-pretty face. It was George's turn to gesture vaguely at nothing in particular, a newly opened knife laying across his palm with the shine of cobalt metal.

"What?" he prompted. "How?"

"Let's go to the shop," Karl still had that lax ease all about his tone, shining in a lilac sense that didn't seem to match anything George had ever known. "Right now."

George scoffed, but even feigned annoyance couldn't hide his pink-turning cheeks from Karl's watchful gaze. And he tried his best to shrug the whole thing off, and Karl would give him props for that—but he knew, even then, that it wasn't going to work.

"He's probably not even working right now."

Karl kept pressing. "Then we'll ask whoever is."

"Wh—"

"Come on!" Karl interrupted. "We're going," he started to walk away from the counter, rounding the island and letting George's gaze follow his every move, "get your keys or whatever."

"Karl," George said accusingly, "I hate you."

Karl giggled in lilac swirls. “Cute.”

George frowned, pointed his free hand in Karl’s direction with an accusatory finger. The visual of it only prompted Karl to laugh harder.

“Do *not* call me cute.”

Karl laughed harder even still, retreating toward George’s front door with a nearly forgotten call over his shoulder: “I’ll be in the garage!” And he knew that George would follow him.

Their destination wasn’t terribly far, but that didn’t mean Karl was going to go the speed limit. He knew that George was similar to him in more ways than he cared to admit; one of the only things he *would* admit was that they both found a thrill in going faster than the law. So that’s what they did, rived Karl’s earlier reckless driving in the way they weaved between cars and cut people off.

But that was the point, wasn’t it? To feel how close death got when they slid in front of another car, to feel it brush its gentle fingertips against their skin just like the wind did when they flew down the road.

In a mess of neon lights, Karl felt like he was at home. And even without predetermined racing, he still felt a need to go faster than George. Felt a need to reach their destination first, felt a need to rub it in his face when he inevitably halted in an adjacent alley before George could even tap his brakes.

And that’s exactly what happened. Atop his purple chrome motorcycle, he laughed at George and the way he lagged behind. Found an opportunity to push away the doubt George had held earlier, the doubt that Karl had managed to outspeed a random stranger. A friendly type of *look at me now*, but George was only rolling his eyes as he kicked his bike into park and watched Karl do the same.

They stumbled into the shop one after another, left fuchsia-stained alleyways behind in favor of the soft lime beyond the door. The distant sound of passing cars faded as the door shut behind them, an amalgamation of deadly weapons strewn about their favorite hole-in-the-wall store and bathed beneath green light.

The single room was empty. Empty besides George and Karl, empty besides the blond-haired man waiting behind the counter. He gave them a grin, stuck somewhere between wicked and welcoming, a heavy emerald glow cast within his eyes. Even with the distance, Karl could see a spread of ink where it coated the man’s large hands. Even with the distance, Karl could see the way soft green light reflected off the metal by his brow, the ebon glow of it edged with lime.

Despite their status as *strangers*, Karl would dare to say that it suited him. Suited him like the matching barbell in Sapnap’s tongue suited *him*.

“Hey,” he greeted, waving in their general direction. “404’s back.”

George nodded with a smile, and Karl gave him a strange look. He’d known that George went by the numbers on his face while in the racing scene, just as Karl only went by the first letter of his name. But he hadn’t realized that pseudonyms extended to cute boys in weapons stores—and, admittedly, this boy *was* cute—because he didn’t think that George had anything to hide from him.

Racing was still technically illegal, but it’s not like much was ever done about it. Not like threats of lightless prisons scared Karl enough to don a mask, not like he’d ever heard the shrill sound of sirens for himself. (There were bigger problems in this city, problems that related to George and why he had a 404 tattoo in the first place).

“Hello,” George said finally, the word sounding too-proper when spoken with his rounded accent. “It’s good to see you again.”

Karl laughed by the door, earning an incredulous look sent over George’s shoulder while he approached the counter where the blond stood. At some point, he’d pulled the blue-bladed knife from his pocket, toying with the sheathed weapon between his hands.

“Don’t act so proper, *404*,” Karl teased, gaining him another accusatory look. “What happened to the pretty boy I know?”

He walked over to George and the counter so he could ruffle his hair, a displeased whine falling past George’s lips. The blond behind the counter laughed at that, the lime in his eyes dulling to a more natural hue. He, like George, was playing with a knife between his inked fingers—only his was silver-bladed, something orange etched carefully into the bottom of the handle.

“Who’s your friend?” The blond asked, nodding towards Karl.

George seemed to open his mouth to answer, but with the watchful eye of a cute boy holding a knife, he froze. Karl swallowed the giggle as it rose in his throat, twisting his teasing smile into kindness so he could look in the blond’s direction.

“K.” Karl held up his hand to show off the tattoo. “He told me,” he gestured toward George, “that he doesn’t know *your* name.”

George sputtered for a moment, both Karl and the stranger in question laughing above the noise. Karl found enjoyment in the high, airy sound of the blond’s amusement, every noise sounding tugged out of him while his eyes screwed shut.

“Shut up,” George groaned indignantly, the sound of it barely audible over the surrounding loud laughter.

The blond took a slow, deliberate breath, tapping the handle of the flipped-open knife against the glass of the counter he was leaning on. He seemed to shake his head, lips quirking in a pleasant smile when eyes fell away from George’s half-pleased gaze.

“Well,” he started pointedly, “you never asked.”

George frowned at the stranger. “I’m asking now.”

The blond gave him an expectant look, his grin edging ever-closer to the virdian realm of teasing. Karl watched with playful amusement as George’s expression turned from confusion to annoyance, a thin groan tugging at his lips in tandem with the roll of his eyes.

“Oh my god,” George complained, and all Karl could do was laugh. “Fine. What’s your name?”

He fluttered his eyelashes with the question. Karl wanted to hit him.

“Dream.”

“Oh, cool.” George’s voice had finally taken on a more casual tone, all his strangely out of character properness gone just as fast as it arrived. *Whipped*. “Is it from a tattoo?”

Dream laughed, shaking his head. “No, a friend of mine gave it to me when we were kids and it stuck.” He dropped the knife against the counter to hold up his hands. “I’ve got tattoos, but they don’t really mean anything.”

Karl laughed at that, finally getting a proper look at the ink that covered the backs of Dream's hands. Shades of black and white covered all of his skin—one hand was done like a skeleton and the other a mess of what felt like a thousand images. Dream held his hands still, flattened his palms out against the counter, and it let Karl get a good look.

He saw rose petals on his hands and crude smiley faces inked into his fingers, he saw crescent moons and words he never got the chance to read. A little cloud with a lightning bolt at the base of his pinky, all images that Dream claimed to be *meaningless*.

Karl grinned at the sight of his ink-covered hands, cast a glance in George's direction to see just how awestruck he really looked. Karl knew that George was a little more into tattoos than the average person, so he figured that this was part of what made this guy so hot.

The door opened and shut in the distance behind them. Dream seemed to perk up, inked hand falling back over the knife he'd dropped against the counter. He grinned wider and with more established friendliness, eyes alight with everything but an emerald glow.

"Sapnap!"

The familiarity of the name on Dream's tongue made Karl spin. He caught George's eye through the middle of it, caught the lifted brow and half-done smirk. And as Karl finished his rotation, sure enough, Sapnap was standing there in all his still-very-hot glory. The grin spread across his face in gentle familiarity dared to falter, dull eyes catching on Karl's gaze with a pulse of glowing orange.

He seemed to ignore Dream and the cry of his name, seemed to ignore the furrowing sense of confusion as it spread across the blond's freckled face. Sapnap lifted a hand to point vaguely in Karl's direction, ringed hand stuck in the tense air between them where it hung with familiarity. Karl stutters over the start of a thousand different words, but none of them ever wrap to completion around the tip of his tongue.

Sapnap beats him to it.

"K?"

Karl tries his best to nod, gaze flicking down from unlit eyes and finding the shadow of ink below Sapnap's collarbone. In a mess of adrenaline beneath fuschia-toned lights, he hadn't been able to discern its shape. In a mess of fluster beneath lime glow, he could tell that it was a flame.

"Yeah," he gasped out finally, "that's me."

He giggled in the familiar lilac swirls, and he watched a warmth-edged smile spread across Sapnap's face. He was slow when he approached the others, slow when he slid in beside Karl and in front of Dream with one hand balanced gently on the glass.

"You two know each other?" Dream asked with a gesture, his hand flitting between Karl and Sapnap where they stood in front of him.

Their eyes met for a moment before they both looked back to Dream. Karl found George's accusatory glances where they dug into the side of his skull, a gentle nod coming in a silent message that Karl couldn't discern.

"Kinda." Sapnap shrugged. "We raced earlier, but that's it."

Karl looked back at the flame-branded man, laughing quietly between his lips and filling the tense space between them with a calm shade of violet. Sapnap smiled, met his eyes on a side glance

before they fell back on Dream. Dream, whose confusion had only come to be *more* apparent through all their shared looks.

“You race?”

The question was directed at Karl, though it took him a moment to process it. It wasn’t until three sets of eyes were all finding the depths of his soul through his skin, a lone finger rising up from his side to point at himself through his stupor.

“Me?”

Friendly laughter erupted from around him, filling his ears with gentle color. He cracked a smile through all the biteless amusement, ring-clad hand falling to catch on the edge of the counter. Dream rolled his eyes with a careful type of teasing, all lilt in the most verdant hues. (It matched the light that filled the room, and Karl found that endearing).

“Yes, you,” Dream said pointedly, fingers toying with the blade still dropped against the glass.

“Oh,” Karl giggled, “yeah, I race.”

Sapnap seemed to give him an accusatory look, one careful with its titian bite. It was raised eyebrows and a look in his eyes that may have felt harsh without context—and when Karl squinted, he’d swear he could see the gentle flecks of tangerine hiding in his irises.

He gave Sapnap an incredulous look back, brows arching in a way that didn’t match Sapnap’s curl. Something in the space between them shifted, and even without the rush of adrenaline through his well-spent veins, it reminded Karl of the magenta-lit alleyway. It reminded him of orange chrome motorcycles that matched glowing eyes just right, it reminded him of feigned confidence that he could no longer replicate.

Maybe that’s what this was about.

“Sap,” Dream interrupted their staring contest with the slide of a blade across glass, “I got your knife.”

Sapnap’s eyes tore away from Karl’s to look down at the counter, and Karl let his lilted gaze follow. Black-tipped fingers wrapped around the handle of the weapon, hands looking blank when pitted so close to Dream’s. He lifted the knife up and let it slide down into his palm, resting comfortably in a way that looked like it was meant to be there.

“Thanks, dude.” Sapnap flipped the blade open, glimmering silver beneath a catch of green light. “This thing’s sick.”

Dream laughed, leaning forward with his palms pressed flat against the counter. His eyes flicked accusingly between Karl and Sapnap again, edged with an emerald glow that still stood out against all the flowing lights. Sapnap was a tad distracted by the knife in his hands, just as George was on the other side of Karl—but Karl himself couldn’t look anywhere but those jade-tinted eyes.

“So,” he ran his tongue along the underside of his teeth, “who won the race?”

With swirls of mulberry laughter, it seemed pretty obvious which one of them had won. And Sapnap was even frowning, knife-wielding hand dropped lazily to his side with a similar heaviness to his lowered eyebrows. Dream laughed alongside Karl, which only etched Sapnap’s face deeper with displeasure, looking like he may as well sock his friend in the face.

“I won,” Karl said finally, a prideful grin covering every inch of his lips. “Sapnap’s slow.”

“I am *not*!” Sapnap defended, knocking the heel of his knifeless palm against Karl’s shoulder. “I just wasn’t expecting you to be a fucking idiot.”

“Hey!” Karl hit Sapnap on the shoulder, striking hard enough with the back of his hand to dig rings into his shoulder. “I’m not an idiot!”

“I have *never* seen *anyone* drive like that,” Sapnap scoffed, “and Dream is the worst driver I’ve ever seen.”

“Karl’s a good driver,” George offered.

Karl was ready to back George up in violet earnest, a smile already halfway across his face in a silent *thank you*. He was a good driver, and that crazy accident from however many years ago was really the only trouble he’d ever had.

“He’s just stupid.”

Nevermind.

“I’m not stupid!” Karl’s voice had run higher than it usually did, strained with tugged on lavender through every syllable. “*You’re* stupid, I hate you.”

“You drive so fucking fast all the time,” George quipped. “Can’t you just go the speed limit? For once?”

“No,” Karl huffed, “that’s no fun.”

George rolled his eyes with pained indignance, but he dropped the argument anyways. He returned his gaze to the shining knife between his hands, went back to running his fingers across it with lost admiration. Karl noticed the way Dream was watching George appreciate the blade, the way he was just watching George in general; with a careful gaze, something deeper, something shaded a little bit more red than green.

Karl pulled himself away from the counter to give them space, brushed his shoulder against Sapnap’s intentionally as he wandered to the other side of the room.

“So you drive like that all the time?”

Karl turned at the sound of Sapnap’s voice, finding that he too had started to walk away from the others. The knife in his hand had been closed, shut handle spun between his fingers with a hidden type of danger. Karl thought about the scar on the back of his hand, thought about how easy it’d be for Sapnap to give him another one.

Karl shrugged in answer. “Maybe not *exactly* like that, but yeah.”

Sapnap huffed out a laugh, shaking his head carefully. The knife wound up in the pocket of his jacket, feet carrying him ever-closer to where Karl stood. When they stood this close, Karl could see the tangerine hiding behind dull viridian, could see the way it wished to glow under the cover of lime green light.

Karl smiled. He wondered if the violet in his eyes was visible, too.

“You ever gotten in an accident driving like that?”

Karl managed to laugh, though even he knew it wasn't funny. It came out in slews of mauve instead of lilac, tinted darker in lost amusement. He ran a hand through his hair and felt the rings catch where it had tangled, eyes falling to the ground and losing Sapnap's gaze.

"Yeah," he laughed again, but it was still tinted mauve, "once."

"Damn," Sapnap's eyebrows lifted, "only once?"

Karl shrugged, dragging a nervous hand down the length of his arm. He laughed again beneath his breath, the twists of dark purple cut by calm alabaster.

"It was years ago," he admitted, finding Sapnap's gaze again. "Screwed up my memory, though."

Even though Karl laughed with his words, Sapnap's eyes seemed to fall. Flecks of orange faded off into obscurity in favor of the dull green, slipping by without so much as a pulse. Karl watched his face morph into something like pity, hands in his pockets with clear indications of fiddling. Karl could imagine it, his inkless hands toying with the knife he'd put in his jacket pocket.

Sapnap's lips parted and shut over and over again, wordless in the honey-orange way.

"Oh." His eyes flicked between Karl's face and the floor, never staying in one place for more than a second. "Like, you forget things a lot?"

"Yeah, a lot of stuff's hazy," Karl rubbed at the back of his neck with a harsh press, feeling the metal of his jewelry where it dragged across his skin. "I don't think I could tell you exactly how old I am," he giggled, "and it doesn't help that the sky always looks the same."

Karl's laughs came in mauve-edged amusement. Sapnap was laughing, too, but his felt infinitely more strained.

"You're okay, though?"

The honesty in his tone was coated thick with tangerine, green eyes softened in gentle earnest. Karl smiled, a shine of ivory behind pink lips, his eyes fluttering shut in the gleeful sense of expression.

"Better than ever."

Sapnap laughed quietly, the grin on his face more kind than anything. He tugged his hands out of his pockets and took the knife with him, fiddling with it between his hands and flipping the silver blade out. He had his eyes on Karl when he toyed with the blade, the quiet sense of danger in his motions something like intoxicating to a near-silent Karl.

"What," he hesitated, "what kind of stuff do you usually forget?"

"Stuff that's not important." Karl shrugged. "I always remember the real stuff, like where I live and how to get back to 404's, but a lot of stuff is kind of a mess."

Despite the fact that Sapnap's face was already edged downward, it dared to fall further. "Oh."

Karl tried to laugh it off again, but the dark tones to his half-feigned amusement persisted, just as Sapnap's frown did. The hands that held a freshly sharpened knife faltered in motion, eyes falling down to watch intently. Sapnap closed his knife with a gentle slowness, pocketing it just as soon as he'd taken it out.

Karl looked down at his own hand, at the rough-edged scar that covered the surface of his skin. He

ran a thumb over it carefully, felt it where it rose with unkind scar tissue and tried just a little bit harder to remember how he'd gotten it.

All he found in the depths of his memory was the image of a knife on the floor and the way it had spun. He couldn't even remember who'd been there at all.

"Yeah." Karl lifted his scarred hand between them, placed it in Sapnap's line of sight. "Like this scar, I don't remember how I got it."

Sapnap curled his fingers around Karl's wrist without hesitation, stepping closer to him to cover the distance. He trailed fingers down the length of the scar—long, thin, and etched in with a knife. Karl momentarily tensed under the touch, but only because he hadn't been expecting it; he found Sapnap's gentleness comforting, the way he trailed his hands over his with a flame-tinted care. And his skin was warm like the fire beneath his collarbone, warm like the wrap of something friendly.

Karl didn't realize until then how much he'd grown used to the chill of night air, how long he'd gone without another person's hands on him. When all the days felt the same and the sky never changed, it got hard to tell when the last time it was he'd felt something. (A touch that wasn't George's teasing hands, a touch that wasn't an unfriendly punch to the nose).

"You can't remember how you got it?" Sapnap queried, eyes rising from the scar on his hand to find Karl's violet-laced eyes. "Like, at all?"

"Some things remind me of the memory," Karl flexed his fingers, "but it's all..." he thought for a moment, dug through his brain in a hopeless search for the right words, "I don't know, in pieces."

Sapnap trailed the pad of his finger along the scar, still feeling a little too rough to be fading. His eyebrows were knitted in something akin to worry, but Karl couldn't find the right words of reassurance within himself.

"That sucks."

"Eh," Karl shrugged, "something tells me that memory's not one I wanna keep."

Sapnap laughed for real this time, pulling his hands away from Karl's. Karl mourned the loss of his heated touch for a moment too long, tugged his other hand up into his sightline to survey the both of them. His unscarred hand was the one that was inked, a black-letter *K* slid permanently beneath his skin.

Sapnap cleared his throat awkwardly, gaining Karl's attention and pulling his eyes away from his hands. He gave him a wide-eyed stare in anticipation, somehow enthralled by the way Sapnap stared at the floor with knocks of confusion hidden in his face.

Orange pulsed. Karl smiled.

"Scar looks cool," Sapnap coughed, "though."

Karl perked up with a too-wide grin, lifting his hands once again to look at his marks. He giggled calmly in the lilac swirls he seemed to miss, and Sapnap looked less nervous and more gleeful to hear the sound.

"Doesn't it?" Karl exclaimed. "I always kinda liked it."

"Yeah." Sapnap's smile twisted closer to a grin. "It's kinda hot, y'know."

Karl giggled again, his hand coming up to press against his lips. He felt his face flush pink, felt his blood rush forward to the front of his cheeks in something just a little bit unwanted. It, like Sapnap, was warm in a calm sense of fire—but it felt less alight than ring-clad hands, felt more like shadows of red glow that hid beneath sinners.

He looked for something to say. In curls of awkward fumbling, he came up empty-handed. It wasn't until his eyes refocused that he found the words, when it came clear in his view that Sapnap had latched the black barbell in his tongue between his front teeth to let Karl see it.

It wrapped in green light just as Dream's eyebrow piercing did, but Karl thought the jewelry was hotter in Sapnap's tongue.

"Your piercing's kinda hot."

Sapnap grinned proudly through his strangely twisted lips, knocked the barbell against his teeth when he slid his tongue back into his mouth. Karl didn't miss the pink tint that flooded his cheeks, not even beneath the glow of emerald light.

"I was wondering," Sapnap pointed a finger in Karl's direction with heavy accusation, "where that side of you went."

Karl's eyebrows furrowed, hands coming together to twist the rings around his fingers. "What side of me?"

"Bold," Sapnap shrugged, "reckless, as you say."

"For the record," Karl interrupted himself in lilac tendrils, "you said it first."

"Well," Sapnap stepped closer to Karl where he stood, close enough that their noses nearly touched, "how about that rematch?"

The flame-hued danger that swallowed his tone was something Karl wanted more of, more of his voice and the way it surged his body in a thousand different colors. And their proximity only served to light him brighter, a clash of titian hues in tandem with darkened violet, all of it cast strangely beneath a lime-colored glow.

Karl grinned. It rivaled Sapnap in cockiness, rivaled him in danger and unforgiving. His eyes flicked briefly to where George and Dream were standing in the distance, finding that they'd both wound up behind the counter with their lips a little too close for Karl to want to stay.

He fluttered his eyelashes with the edge of danger still beneath his gaze. "Let's do it."

Nothing else was required to get them rushing out the door. They didn't pay any mind to their friends in the corner, and it seems they didn't pay them any mind either. Karl knew that he'd see George again before he knew it; in their strange, timeless world, all roads led back to his apartment.

Except maybe this road. The one that he stood outside the green-lit weapons shop trailing behind someone who was still nothing more than a really hot stranger, a stranger who knew a little bit more about him than some other people might. Bathed beneath a new shade of red-pink, swallowed by an unexpected brightness in a quiet alleyway. Rushing over to a row of four pretty-colored bikes, all looking a little too cohesive in their neat little line.

Karl noticed that Sapnap had parked his next to Karl's. He wondered if that was intentional.

As Karl threw his leg over his bike, he laughed out a question in Sapnap's direction.

"Does Dream give a lot of boys free knives for cute bikes?"

Sapnap laughed in answer, orange motorcycle beneath him roaring to life. He gave Karl a glance from where they both sat, helmetless racing a force to be reckoned with.

"No, he just thought 404 was pretty." He dropped his hands against the handlebars and knocked his kickstand up. "But we're not talking about them right now."

Karl back-heeled his kickstand as well, the engine in his bike roaring alive beneath him. "No, we're not."

They locked eyes through magenta tones, through invisible shades of red that Karl wondered if Sapnap could see. It glowed in impenetrable carmine, visible in its truest form even beneath a wash of fuschia light. Karl was always surprised by how well every color seemed to mesh with its adjacent.

"You're dead, K."

Karl laughed. "Am I?"

"So dead." Sapnap smirked. "I'll beat you."

They pushed their bikes out away from the wall, hands shifting against handlebars with flaming anticipation. Karl could already feel the curls of adrenaline where they ran through his veins, a twirling red-violet with the color of mistakes. His heart was pounding so hard he worried it might burst through his ribcage, shattering his bones clean-open in an unruly thrust of death.

"I'll kiss you if you win."

Sapnap's eyes widened with shades of neon orange, another smirk crossing his lips. He revved his motorcycle with a cocky loudness, but not before Karl caught the way he clicked his tongue piercing against his teeth.

"Promise?"

Karl giggled, scarred hand coming off his handlebar to push at his bottom lip. "Duh."

And as if that had been the starting gun or the flick of a newly green light, they sped off into the eternal night. Swung out of a familiar alleyway, spun into a busy street with enough speed to be concerning. Karl knew they'd thrown a few cars off-guard, and definitely not in the good way—but none of that mattered. Their bikes were still small enough to weave between the lines, fast enough to rush toward a red light in the distance that was far too close to brake for.

Not like Karl was going to brake for it anyways. His only plan was to go *faster*, to let the red arrow he didn't want to see edge closer to the max as he tipped his bike in curved avoidance. And it was then, *then* that he realized there was no flash of orange in his peripheral vision, realized that he'd outmaneuvered Sapnap once again and had a better than good chance at winning their race.

And for the first time since Karl had started racing, he realized that he didn't want to win.

His mind was clouded by thoughts of ebon piercings and soft lips, thoughts of straddling an orange motorcycle with a hot guy's lips on his. Even if he had a streak he liked to brag about and a hell of an ego, Karl was dreaming about losing. And the way racing had become so second-nature to him

was apparent in the way he still drove near-flawlessly even through his haze, weaved between cars and drove on center lines toward upcoming stoplights.

Red shone out in circle formations. Karl flossed his way through another busy intersection with his heartbeat hot in his ears. In a city that always felt timeless, nothing felt more frozen than that moment—the one in the center intersection, when he could finally catch a glow of orange in the corner of his eye.

Karl slowed down.

He was still definitely speeding, he was still definitely reckless, and his swerving past driving cars was still borderline idiotic. But the coursing flow of wind through his hair whipped less strong, the sound of his fast-beating heart became louder where it punched against his ribs. He breathed out of his mouth in adrenaline-fueled exertion, eyes on the road as he caught a tangerine-colored flash speed past him.

There was a moment to wonder if Sappnap felt victorious. Karl wondered if he was obvious in the way he'd thrown the race, but he made up for it with riskier movements. Justification for his slowed speeds came in curving leans on a balance of two wheels, pulses of messy color where it ran along buildings by the street.

Hands shook against handlebars, fingers curled tight enough that they began to ache at knuckle junctions and scars felt strained and tighter. Karl gritted his teeth when he flew past a neon green supercar, skating a little bit too close for comfort—close enough that he tore a shaking hand off the grip, stretched over himself to latch onto his opposite hand in a move that swerved his bike sideways.

Too close for comfort. He nearly hit an electric blue car.

But even when he brushed fingertips with the very definition of death, even when he could feel phantom cracks in his ribs where they would've hit the pavement, Karl laughed through his open mouth and caught back on the grip. Adrenaline pressed him to drive faster, lust reminded him of the man he wished to win.

Sappnap was within his sights, and Karl would swear he could feel his radiance through all the distance. He curved closer to him, let his front wheel come dangerously close to Sappnap's back just for the thrill of it, revved his engine for no reason other than to make him aware.

Within seconds, Sappnap swerved into the nearest alley in an unspoken finish line. Karl followed with the screech of tires, followed with the stain of black rubber against pavement and the knowledge that he needs a replacement. In pulsing engines beneath his body, he looked up at Sappnap and his orange-glowing eyes, his entire form bathed beneath a crimson shade of light.

The alley they had halted in lacked doors into hidden caverns. All it was was them, the rush of cars on the adjacent street, and the glow of scarlet that swallowed them whole. Karl remembered something about sinners beneath the night, the way that every moment came shrouded in darkness in a way that felt earned.

There were no sins in broad daylight, only sins in lime-shaded weapon stores and hot boys who glowed beneath carmine.

Karl grinned, and he was sure his teeth glowed red. "You won."

Sappnap huffed out a laugh, leaning his elbows against the front of his bike so he could edge closer

to Karl. They'd pitted themselves facing each other on their motorcycles, knuckles turned as if they could knock them together in a too-friendly gesture. Dark red swallowed Karl's scar, but it made purple chrome turn deeper in something he wanted to favor.

"You *threw*."

Karl wasn't going to deny it, because that would be a lie. He only shrugged slightly with his hands on the handlebars, laughed in violet that turned to dreadful colors with an unholy spill. Sapnap was grinning despite the accusation in his tone, the accusation that lurked beneath flame-colored glows.

"Maybe I value your ego." Karl kept every word thick with obvious sarcasm. "I don't wanna hurt your feelings, Sap."

Sapnap scoffed, pulling upward to lay palms over the grips. His gaze pulled away from Karl for a moment, falling on the shades of red that painted the walls deadly. Like blood, it spilled out in dangerous sense.

"I don't think that's what it is, K."

Karl shrugged again, but the smirk on his face had become more sheepish. None of it lost the edge of arrogance, only striking higher when he caught ebon metal knock against teeth.

"Maybe."

"You could've just asked to kiss me." Sapnap spoke without the nerves from earlier. "We didn't have to race over it, nimrod."

Karl giggled in lilac hues. "I like dares."

Sapnap shook his head, indignant painted all over his face with every inch of the move. Karl couldn't help but laugh again, catching fondness in Sapnap's smile and confidence in his eyes. In a strange way, it reminded Karl of himself.

"It wasn't a dare."

Karl knocked his heel against the kickstand to strike it down. "Then I like challenges."

Sapnap scoffed and shook his head, one hand pulling off the handlebars. Karl giggled quietly, and in a fit of rushing adrenaline, he climbed off his motorcycle to wander his way closer. With a still-present thrown and waning arrogance, Sapnap rolled his eyes at Karl.

"You *lost* the race."

Karl laughed again, swung his leg over Sapnap's bike to sit halfway on top of his thighs. The bike shook beneath them, and Karl was close enough to Sapnap's face to catch all the shock in his orange-tinted eyes. But Karl was all smiles, arms slinging over Sapnap's shoulders and wrists locking behind his head.

"And you won," he said with confidence, "so I'm gonna kiss you."

Sapnap laughed quietly, but they were close enough for Karl to feel the breath of it on his lips. Close enough for him to catch a lick of raven on a pink tongue when his lips parted, close enough to watch his pupils dilate when the neon orange pulsed.

"Is that so?"

Karl didn't answer, only hummed in acknowledgement and pushed his lips against Sapnap's. It came faster than he thought it would, but it made sense seeing how close they were—close enough to mix breaths, close enough to clash lips.

Sapnap's mouth was warmer than his hands had been. And his hands were warmer than they'd been then earlier, too, wrapped around Karl's waist with a grip that tugged him closer. He sat properly in his lap with their lips moving against each other, teeth grazing against his bottom lip with a feather-lightness that made him shiver.

He split his lips open without question. Let a dark-shaded tongue piercing glide across his lips, let slick sounds beneath crimson light rush about the air in just the sense that Karl knew it would be. *Like sin.*

And Sapnap tasted like sin, too. Like bad decisions at unknown times and lights beneath a forever-dark sky, like the tang of something metallic and starless with a bite that matched the night. It felt like colorless risk and tangerine fantasies, it felt like he'd been waiting for this forever, even if it had only really been a few hours.

The roll of a piercing across his open lips was hot like fire, the lick of a tongue through the part in them felt like flame. He tasted the ash in Sapnap's mouth where it laid unmoving, felt the burn of hot embers left over from something beautiful and unholy without regret. It felt unforgivable, but in the pretty, sin-laced way that drew a noise from the center of Karl's chest.

Sapnap knocked his piercing against Karl's teeth with a click. He felt it within the curves of his skull, felt it hook beneath an upper row and drag against the roof of his mouth. With a gasping breath, Karl's hands caught around Sapnap's face to drag him closer, both of them tugging on the other in a hopeless chase for something unknown. Something red, perhaps, or maybe it was orange and violet.

(Sapnap and his sin-flavored lips reminded Karl of danger, and that was something he'd been chasing since before lost memories).

Their chests knocked together with enough force for huffed-out breath, enough force for metal to click against ivory teeth in ebon gleams. Karl whined near invisibly, trailed rough hands down Sapnap's front to catch on the lapels of his jacket and pull. Through tangs of metal shot through wet tongues, Karl tasted the blade of a knife where it dragged against his lips.

It didn't cut. Not even when a pierced tongue reeled back in favor of knocking teeth, not even when quiet bites became loud and threatening with the dig of something ivory. It was exactly opposite of knife-like thunder, though it was the thing that truly tore into his skin. Left indents against sensitive flesh with the tease of something crimson, something matching in color to the light that spilled against the walls.

Fingertips dug into the skin of Karl's hips beneath his shirt with enough claiming harshness to make him twist on a wanton sound. Perhaps his merciless fingers would leave bruises, perhaps they'd be in just the right shape for him to settle his hands back into before they faded. (Because there would be a next time).

Lips slipped apart in a moment of mixed breath, in a moment of slicked lips put inches away from each other in swirls of pretty color.

"Sap," Karl gasped, "oh my god."

A ringed hand came up to thread through long hair, pulling Karl's head up to arch his neck in a

way that exposed his entire throat. It was nothing but an expanse of untouched skin for Sapnap to have at, something akin to a blank canvas cast beneath scarlet light.

“Yeah?” he whispered, nothing but breath on a thread of pale skin.

Arms slid back around Sapnap’s neck, resting gently atop his shoulders to lock hands behind his head. And the whine that slid past Karl’s swelling lips was in acknowledgement, a responding *yeah* that came out much more desperate than it would’ve if he’d just said it out loud.

Sapnap huffed a breathy laugh against his skin, and Karl would say it had painted his neck orange. It felt like heat pushed on his throat, felt like a flame licking against him the same way a pierced tongue had. And it became a pierced tongue only a moment later, the drag of heat and metal pulled against his skin in a glide that felt so *desirable*.

A ringed hand tugged on long hair, and Karl could do nothing but whine. Nothing but shift himself for the thousandth time, feel every inch of where their bodies were pressed together when his fingers laced into the jacket that covered Sapnap’s shoulders, gathered the fabric beneath his palms without mercy. And he rolled himself closer with the push of his chest, mouth spread open on heaving breaths edged with high, lilac noises.

Sapnap smirked with lips against his skin. And he rolled the piercing over Karl’s empty throat, dragged his teeth along a newly spit-slick patch with enough force to leave an indent. The perfect little divot for Sapnap to carve his piercing into, to drag it through roughed-up skin with that same dangerous edge.

And Karl could still feel that knife-like tang where it had clung to his lips. It stuck to him with pins and needles, with soft pricks to his sensitive skin in the same shade of tangerine. Like walking over hot coals with bare feet, like all things that left scars and whispered mantras of how they’d never leave. Karl’s breath caught in his throat when teeth dared to edge into his skin harder, a newfound vigor behind a move of sucking on pale flesh.

With an audible sound, Sapnap pulled his lips free of Karl’s neck. He’d left the spot slick and tainted, left it pinkish-red beneath sin-colored lights with a threat to turn purple over time. A twist of amethyst against otherwise perfect skin, an echo of something Karl only ever knew to be *claiming* left by a man he’d barely met.

But he liked the thought of it being there. Pulled his fingers free from a tight grip on Sapnap’s shoulder to trail against the mark, feeling where teeth had edged him close to open and bleeding red to match a shaded alley. He could feel the radiance of Sapnap’s grin where it shifted flames within his body, could feel the lust-edged gaze through narrow eyes when it raked up the column of his throat.

Fingertips still dancing against a twisting bruise, Karl flitted his eyes down to meet Sapnap’s through their tension. And his lips that he felt would never close were shining under the carmine light, shining just as Sapnap’s were with that damn *piercing* still edged against his teeth. It caught with the same pretty juxtaposition that Karl had felt drip past his lips, a literal rendition of black and white cast in shades under sinful crimson.

Karl wished to taste it. Wished to taste it *again*. And all it took to grant his wish was a quick lean forward, a collision into grinning lips that came with a gentle hand moved into the back of light brown hair and a tug of their faces closer. Sapnap groaned against his lips and it was embers, it was burning in the most desirable way imaginable where it charred his lips ebon-black.

And he sucked his tongue into his mouth with whining fervor, with a lust-led chase for the

glimmer of metallic flavor in the way it felt dangerous. Like the quiet brushes with death that Karl had felt on the street, like his shoulder knocking against protruding car mirrors and his hand coming off the grip. Like the knife still hidden in Sapnap's pocket, like the way it could cut him clean open if he ever bothered to ask.

(Maybe he would, or maybe he just wasn't thinking straight—maybe he hadn't learned from forgotten events involving spun knives and rough scars).

Karl whined, gripped his hand between Sapnap's jaw and the side of his neck, dug nails into the skin wherever he could. It earned him another groan against their pressed lips, the roll of a metallic piercing against his pink tongue an adrenaline-flavored glide.

His heart still thundered in his chest, his ribs still threatened to crack. But his sternum was crawling with tendrils of orange flame, with catches of vicious purple in his own careful reminder, all of it tangling together between the spaces of his ribcage and the outside of his skin.

Karl whined his way through a gasp in pathetic intimacy, felt the gentle caress of scarlet hues where it dragged up his arms. Parted lips slid off each other with a soft slickness, tongues found their way back to the mouths they belonged in (unless they belonged in each other's) with and without the glow of raven-colored barbells.

"Sap," he pulled at his neck, "let me..." it split when a hand gripped his ass, "let me give you one."

Sapnap's responding laugh was low and breathy, one hand tugging gently on Karl's hair. It drew another whine past his swollen lips, dragged out another breath of lilted amusement against his neck. But even with that, Sapnap tipped his head to the side, a self-assured grin spread across his lips with careful invitation.

"Do your worst, K."

He latched his mouth onto Sapnap's neck before another second could pass, a clumsy knock of teeth against untouched skin before his lips could press forward. But he kept his biting ivory harsh, gave his dig into skin with enough ferocity to bruise. (That was the entire point, after all). The hand in his hair dared to pull tighter, to twist his head against a freshly marked neck with the drag of teeth all the same.

Karl whined into Sapnap's skin, pushed against him with a newfound harshness and gripped his shoulder tighter than he could bear. The hand that had slipped below his waist tugged him upward, knocked their hips together and shifted the bike they were still precariously balancing on.

Sapnap had neglected to put the kickstand up, trusting himself to keep the motorcycle upright with the stability of his own two feet. It left Karl's feet dangling just above the ground, red-coated pavement within reach but only when he pointed his toes. Karl wondered if they'd fall, but the swaying instability of it made everything just a little bit better. Better in the sense of lingering knife blades on his bitten lips, better in the sense of dragging that metallic danger across spit-slick skin.

Sapnap made a noise when Karl dug his tongue into newly sensitive skin, when his teeth pulled back and left those pretty indents in the flesh he'd sucked pink. He dragged nails against the back of Sapnap's neck in tandem with the swipe of his tongue, made one last open-mouthed kiss against a forming bruise before he pulled back, leaving his teeth latched on the skin for a moment longer than his lips and fluttering his eyes open to see those pretty indents for real.

And Sapnap did the same thing he did—pulled his hand off Karl to drag gentle fingers against the

slicked mark, gripped onto Karl's waist tighter with the other hand. When Karl flicked his eyes up to find Sapnap's face, he caught the too-ivory grin and the orange in his eyes, and all he could do was return the smirk on his own swollen lips.

"That your worst?" Sapnap teased, and it sounded just as dangerous as his lips felt.

(Which made sense, as he would always speak with the same mouth he kissed with).

Karl giggled, managing to shrug as his toes dragged against the pavement. "Unless you wanna bleed."

Sapnap hummed as if in thought, but he never gave an answer. He only shifted both hands to grip Karl's waist, leaning forward so his back knocked against the center point of the handlebars and his feet came up off the ground. Karl made a noise at the sudden movement, one high and caught halfway in his throat, but Sapnap was looming over him with his feet on the ground, that same flame-licked grin still spread across his lips.

He pulled Karl's body closer, thighs bracketing his waist where Karl lay twisted over the seat of his motorcycle. His head threatened to knock into the metal he was laid on, the bike still teetered on instability where it seemed as though it may fall over. He faintly heard the click of a kickstand being knocked down, but even still the whole thing felt precarious.

Sapnap leaned in close enough to paint Karl's cheekbones neon orange. Karl figured he looked a little closer to sinful than Sapnap had ever tasted, his shirt rucked halfway up his chest with a slide against a motorcycle seat and his gasping lips bathed in red. He fluttered his eyelashes like he planned on saying something, but nothing fell past his lips but desperate breaths.

"Do *you* wanna bleed?"

The danger in Sapnap's voice had never ceased to be, dragging blades against Karl's face so often he felt like he was already bleeding. His cheeks were red nonetheless, even without spilled threats or sinful lights, but they certainly felt redder now. (The blood in question rushed to more than one place, but Karl hoped that Sapnap wouldn't notice).

"I want you to kiss me."

Laughter came in drags of titian, in drags of flame that felt hot enough to burn. And the stripes of fire curled around Karl's neck and face, slid through his parted lips with open flame and the tang of metal. It felt like eternity before he got Sapnap's lips back on his, before he could feel the molten lava seep into his mouth in the purest form of death.

He was already whining, already arching his back up off the bike and kicking his legs without much thought on what to do with them. All it took was a ringed hand on his knee and a tug in a certain direction and Karl realized he could lock his ankles around Sapnap's waist and try to tug him closer.

Sapnap found his way back into Karl's mouth as if he'd never left, a drag of ebon metal slid on the insides of his cheeks with that same effortless, *good* taste, like peril. (He tasted better than speeding down busy streets, better than ignored red lights and victories). Careful hands found his waist, fingers trailed up beneath a shirt and a jacket to drag against bare skin.

Metal knocked against Karl's teeth. He whined and gripped harder.

It grew increasingly more difficult to keep up with Sapnap. Karl wondered if this is what he felt like the first time they raced, where the other always seemed to be eight steps ahead and there was

too much ground to cover in not enough time. He felt like his lips were falling lax against Sapnap's, felt like his responsiveness was waning like a moon he hadn't seen, felt like red light was blinding him to everything he knew.

Why does he have to be so good at this?

Karl briefly pondered a possibility of this happening in another alleyway with a different person—but still the same tongue piercing and all the danger that came with it, only it wasn't him being pinned against the handlebars. Within seconds, he decided that he didn't like entertaining that thought. (He still wishes he could keep up).

In a desperate chase for Sapnap's fervor, Karl leaned up off the bike with one leg dropped back against the ground, toes trailing against red-lit pavement with hands caught on shoulders. It knocked their chests back together, let Sapnap shift his hands so they pulled on Karl's bare skin, all of it feeling just a little bit chilled when exposed to the night air. But he was quickly reminded of the heat in Sapnap's veins, of the way it threatened to burn him the same way knives threatened to cut.

He slid a hand around the back of his burning neck. Two sets of lips split open against each other, only one tongue caught a barbell against them. They tugged apart again, and Karl realized that he was sitting up properly like he had been before. Only difference was he still had a leg caught around Sapnap's waist, only difference was their lips looked just a little bit more ruined and scarlet. (Even without the light).

"Jesus," Sapnap managed through a heaving breath. "I don't know what to say."

Karl thought for a moment, let the adrenaline-fueled haze fuel his every action. Like digging his teeth into his own bottom lip, feeling them etch into the divots that Sapnap had left behind with his own ivory hurt. Like dragging his hand around Sapnap's neck and down his chest so he could slip fingers up beneath the hem of his shirt again, fluttering eyelashes without much reason to.

"Well," he started, "you could say that you liked it."

Sapnap scoffed quietly, but even that felt fond in its teasing. And he shook his head in a way that matched the feigned attitude, tightened his grip on Karl's hips in a way that didn't.

"True," he admitted, "but that doesn't feel like enough."

Karl giggled, the long-lost lilac hues finding their way into the air again. And they curled around the dancing flame that was Sapnap's gentle laughter, pulled taut in a greedy tangle of breaths that seemed to hide something within itself. Karl had never thought that purple and orange could mix to red, but he'd swear it was happening right before his eyes. (Red was a part of both their shades, but how did it always come out on top?)

"Actions," Karl whispered, "speak louder than words."

Hands tightened around his waist, black metal rings digging into his sides with careful hurt. It tugged a breath from within his aching ribcage, knocked their foreheads together with a burning proximity that dragged lips against lips. Karl tasted metal in every inch of his mouth, but the flavor was impenetrably orange in shade.

"Yeah?"

It was a drawl against Karl's slick lips, somehow bladed enough to make him shudder. Sapnap caught it, grinning with their faces so close, rubbing circles into Karl's bare hips with his thumbs.

It was a strange gentleness when put against the dig of all his other fingers, crawling beneath his skin with enough force to leave a mark.

Karl would savor them if they were there. Maybe he'd wear something that showed them off like the hickey on his neck.

"Yeah."

It came out whinier than he'd wanted it to, but something in the flame-licked grin and drips of burning laughter told him that Sapnap didn't mind. He trailed gentle kisses along Karl's mouth, none of them quite as sharp as they'd been before—all were careful, deliberate, planted on the corners of Karl's lips and spreading out to the skin around his mouth.

Karl's breath shook on every exhale. It shook on every inhale, too, wrapped in quivering lavender like sprigs in the wind. He felt Sapnap's nails where they carved crescents into the flesh of his hips, digging the semi-circle shapes he barely knew into his body like a promise. What he was promising, Karl wasn't sure—but he knew that it was something he wanted.

"What kind of actions?"

Karl huffed out another curl of lilac, tipped his head back slightly to let Sapnap trail scalding lips down his neck. The gentleness of his mouth was entirely different to the sharp sting of knife blades, the soft trail of warm lips more like a dancing flame. It was the quick flits that came with an unstable light on the wick of a candle, a flurry of soft fire that felt gentle in essence.

Karl would chase it forever, just as he had chased the vicious wildfire hiding behind a tongue piercing. A tongue piercing that was now coasting down the column of his throat, soft with spherical drag and lacking the familiar chill of metal. Shivering breaths spilled out in their light hues, eyes fluttered shut in a swallow of burning violet.

"Like these," Karl whispered, "like your mouth."

Sapnap laughed another tendril of fire, another curled stripe of flame that ran Karl's skin raw and pink. And he ran his tongue up the front of Karl's throat with the lead of his piercing, with a drag over seared skin until he hit Karl's mouth. He caught his bottom lip between his teeth and tugged his head forward, planted an open-mouthed kiss against him with a gasping exhale.

Karl's feet both fell to the ground again when ringed hands trailed back below his waist, lifting him up with a firm enough grip to make him whimper. And with a mouth full of wicked ash and flame, it came out charred around the edges. (He could see it in his head, a burning slip of paper that curled ebon where it died).

Flitting candlelight ceased to be. Karl found that where he'd let the wax drip was a waiting puddle of gasoline, and that all it took was a careful breath before the whole thing was knocked over and it set the world aflame. He felt the heat against his fingertips when they caught in Sapnap's hair, felt the fire where it danced beneath his feet in an all-consuming shade of red.

And when their lips fell apart for what may as well have been the thousandth time, Karl could see the flame where it wrapped around heated ropes of saliva. It coated their lips like molten lava, skated across pink skin until it furled and flaked off.

Karl kept his words in the reddest whisper he could muster. "Like *that*."

A starless piercing clicked against ivory teeth. Karl saw red in every sense of the word, and his body felt swallowed in the most sinful way it could. (It had never felt this unholy with anyone else,

not even when he had all his clothes off on his bed).

“Do you have any actions to make, K?” A hand came up to card through his too-long hair, fingers roaming in that gentility Karl still found abnormal. “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Karl giggled again, shifting on Sapnap’s lap to press his feet on the ground. “I do,” he whispered with a devilish grin, “this.”

He rolled his hips down against Sapnap, savoring the harsh-lit groan that it pulled from his lips. Two hands found a place on Karl’s bruising hips, holding him steady in a halt before he could try to roll his hips again. But the flaming breaths on swollen lips felt stuttered, and Karl swore he could hear a heart that pounded on cracking ribs. (Not his this time, though he could still feel that, too).

“K,” Sapnap warned, “don’t.”

Karl giggled with a sinful lilt, all of it matching the red lights around him. He felt glowing with carmine adrenaline, felt the drips of sapphire blue where they ran down his back in abandon. He cocked his head to the side with mock confusion, used the very little leverage he had with feet on the ground to push his hips down against Sapnap with enough force to make breath catch in his throat.

“Why not?”

He spoke innocently, put skills to practiced use with the flutter of long eyelashes. Sapnap met his eyes through his own narrowed gaze, glows of unnatural orange ever-present in his pale green eyes.

“As hot as you are right now,” he spoke with flaming honesty, “I’d really like our first time to *not* be in an alley.”

Karl laughed again, catches of sapphire blue finding their way back into his voice. He pressed a kiss to the corner of Sapnap’s lips with all the red he had left in his mouth, hands digging into his shoulders with unspoken intent.

“Fine,” he whispered, “I can wait.”

Sapnap smiled, leaving a kiss on Karl’s flushed cheek and feeling the heat of his skin against his lips. He hummed in affirmation, the harsh grip on bruising hip bones letting up to just be claiming. (Claiming in the good way, where he swallowed Karl’s body with quiet want).

“Good boy.”

Karl’s brain may as well have short-circuited. “I can’t wait very long, though.”

Sapnap laughed, tapping his hand against Karl’s waist in fondness. Karl returned his laughter with his own shades of lilac, leaning his forehead against Sapnap’s shoulder in a striking type of lovely when compared to the push of their lips from before. Sapnap rubbed circles into his back with the same type of strange, but Karl would never be someone who wouldn’t welcome it.

And Karl felt like he could hear Sapnap thinking. The radiance of quiet consideration lifted his head up off his shoulder, sent an incredulous look toward Sapnap and his own focused expression.

“Race me,” he said suddenly, “and the winner gets to be the one who says they made the first move.”

Karl giggled. "Is that something people will ask about?"

Sapnap shrugged. "I know Dream always does."

"Okay," Karl grinned, "then let's race."

Though he wasn't excited about pulling his body away from Sapnap's, he *was* excited to race him again. So he stumbled his way back over to his own motorcycle, sitting pretty and purple right where he'd left it. And as he heard the orange bike he'd remember just a little bit better now roar to life behind him, he felt his heart surge alive with careful flame.

It felt a little bit more like the candle again. Karl was grateful for whoever had picked it up.

"And don't throw this time!" Sapnap yelled accusingly, just barely catching the amused look on Karl's face when he finally straddled his motorcycle.

"I won't," Karl called back, "'cause you'll kiss me either way this time!"

It was the quickest moments between then and turning back out onto the busy street, a rush of noise that Karl had grown used to being tuned out filling his ears. It was calm driving to the next red intersection with an agreement to make it fair, shared glances while they waited at their own personal starting line to do something ridiculous for what was now the third time.

Karl smiled through swollen lips. He could see a well-bitten bruise where it lay in stain on Sapnap's neck, could see it just as clearly as the black-ink flame where it sat beneath his collarbone. Karl may have decided then that he wanted to get one to match (ever the impulsive idiot) so he would have confidence in his own fault memory for once in his too-fast life.

The light turned green while their eyes were glued to each other. And they both rushed forward without losing the contact, speeding bikes in whirls of color to blend into the painted night. Karl was laughing when his eyes found the road, rings of purple glow caught on every lick of orange he could find.

In an unsurprising end, Karl won the race. And in bladed predictability, he latched his lips back onto Sapnap's while they stood beside their bikes, purple and orange chrome laying forgotten in favor of flame.

And when Karl finally did find George again after all of that, after however long it had been in an eternal night, he had one too many hickeys to hide and a new tattoo beneath his collarbone.

As promised, he got to say that he was the one who'd made the first move. And when he really thought about it, he was. In slim echoes shaded the polar opposite of regret, Karl heard his own voice where it whispered in his head.

"Wanna race?"

They met on the street, and that's where they loved each other the loudest.

End Notes

i will definitely do more with this au in the future (both dnf & karlnap) because i love it to

bits so uh ,, either sub to me or sub to this series if you want to know when i post more of it :D

maybe smut. i was mean and cockblocked them in this one oops

and here is [my twitter](#) i yelled about this fic a lot on there

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!